

Head Start Parent to Program Director

Almeta Richards Keys

Good afternoon, I'm Almeta Richards Keys. I am a former Head Start parent. Currently, I am the executive director of the Edward C. Mazique Parent Child Center in Washington, DC. I am just so thrilled to be at the National Head Start Association Parent Conference in Virginia Beach, Virginia; and I say thrilled because it just excites me to see all of the parents and to hear all of the success stories that I've been hearing since I've been here.

I have a success story to tell, also. Thirty-one years ago, I came to the Head Start program broke, disgusted, just not knowing which direction my life was going to end up in. I thought that, you know, my charge in life was just to be barefoot and pregnant, and just be at home and – and do – and do – raise my children, but absolutely no life besides home. And then I went to Head Start.

I – I'm originally from Louisiana. And while I am in Washington, DC right now, my start began in Franklin, Louisiana at the Saint Mary Community Action Agency Head Start program. There I served on the Policy Council, and I went from the Policy Council to being the director of the Head Start program. Now that's quite unusual in Head Start, but I felt like I needed to really get involved in the program. And when I saw that there were some things that I just wasn't pleased with, as an empowered Head Start parent, believing everything that Head Start had taught me, I decided that if there was going to be a difference in my local program then it was up to me to help make that difference.

So I just made sure that I studied the rules, the regulations, and before I knew it I was the director of the program. Now that's a story in and of itself, and there are many stories that I can tell, but I think the main story that I would like to say today is that Head Start is about empowering parents, empowering families – about moving families to self-sufficiency. And self-sufficiency, what does that mean? It – it's about being able to get out into your local community and being able to have a voice in your local community.

It goes beyond the Head Start classroom, but it also goes to the – speaks to the fact that, as an empowered parent, there – there are certain things you're expected to do, not just leave Head Start and say my child went to Head Start, I was an empowered parent. But then you have a responsibility to go back into your local community and make it better. Head Start gives you the tools that you need to do just that. And as I said, it was 31 years ago and – and my-oh-my, hasn't it been a wonderful tenure in Head Start.

I have been a Head Start director; I've gone from Head Start director to becoming a National Office of Head Start Fellow. I – I received my Associate, my Bachelor's, and my Master's degree in the Head Start program. Head Start saves lives. I know that it saves lives because it literally saved my life. My – my four children that went to the Head Start program... As a matter of fact, I graduated with my first Head Start child. He was getting his Master's degree in Engineering and I was getting my Bachelor's degree.

And it took me 12 years to get a Bachelor's degree, but you see Head Start gave me the tools to stick with it, to not give up, to know that I could be anything I wanted to be, I could do anything that I wanted to do. So I received my Bachelor's degree, went on to win the Helen Hollandshe Taylor Memorial Scholarship in Head Start, again, and received my Master's degree. And today, here I am in Virginia Beach, Virginia talking about a Head Start success story.

But again, it's about empowering families. And not just empowering them in the one year of the five years, if they're fortunate enough to be in an Early Head Start program, that they're in Head Start, but empowering them for life. To make some life changes for themselves, but not only for themselves, but to get out into the community, get out into the local programs, and give back to the Head Start program and empower families one family at a time. I am just so – so thankful for Head Start. Head Start is a legacy of labor, but it's a legacy of love.

And I just appreciate everything that Head Start has done for me and for my family, and for parents across the country. And I'm determined – I am determined to help every parent experience their dream like Head Start has helped me to experience mine.